

About *Icones*

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Hans Holbein *Icones Historiarum Veteris Testamenti*

Hans Holbein

Icones Historiarum Veteris Testamenti

Lyon, 1547

The *Icones* represents a pivotal moment in the history of Bible images. In this series of woodcuts, Hans Holbein the Younger transformed the traditional late-medieval iconography of the Old Testament into a landmark of Renaissance book illustration. In his beautifully structured compositions, Holbein set solidly contrappostal figures within clearly defined spatial settings. He conveyed emotional depth through delicate nuance of pose and expression, preserved by the skillful cutting of the blocks, and enriched his images using ancient as well as contemporary costumes. Holbein's *Icones* relate grand narrative in very small format, but despite their size, his illustrations are monumentally conceived and could easily be enlarged to the size of murals.¹

1. A comprehensive list of works about the *Icones* is gathered in my annotated Holbein bibliography, *Hans Holbein the Younger: A Guide to Research* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997). In addition, see the Basel Kunstmuseum exhibition catalogue by Christian Müller, *Die Druckgraphik im Kupferstichkabinett Basel* (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1997), pp. 152-68 and 285-301.

Holbein was one of the foremost Renaissance artists of northern Europe. From his time to the present, there is no period in history when his works were not avidly sought by collectors. Holbein was born in Augsburg in late 1497 or early 1498, a son of the important German painter Hans Holbein the Elder. His career was multi-faceted and international in scope. After completing his initial training – probably in his father's studio – he left Augsburg in 1515 to join his older brother Ambrosius (also an artist) in Basel, where he entered the workshop of Hans Herbster. That year he created what may be the earliest known work by his hand, a series of pen-and-ink drawings in the margins of a copy of Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* belonging to a Basel schoolmaster, Oswald Myconius.² The following year he painted portraits of the mayor of Basel, Jakob Meyer, and his wife, Dorothea Kannengiesser. In 1517, he worked in Lucerne with his father on wall paintings for the house of the mayor, Jakob von Hertenstein.

Returning to Basel in 1519, Holbein married, entered the artists' guild *Zum Himmel*, and designed woodcuts for Basel publishers. The field of book illustration remained one of his lifelong interests. In the early 1520s Holbein was commissioned to decorate the walls of the new council chamber in the Basel town hall, and he also created his spectacular illusionistic wall paintings for the Basel *Haus zum Tanz*.

Holbein traveled to London in 1526 with a letter of reference from Erasmus to Thomas More. While living at the More home in Chelsea, he painted a large group portrait of More and his family, as well as portraits of other distinguished sitters such as William Warham, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Returning to Basel in 1528, Holbein experienced the *Bildersturm*, the widespread

destruction of images by Protestant reformers occurring the following year in which a number of his own religious works were probably lost.

In 1532 Holbein moved back to London, entered the service of Henry VIII (probably in 1533), and lived there, except for brief visits to the continent in 1538 and 1539, until his death in 1543. Thus three countries, Germany, Switzerland, and England, claim him as their own.

One of the world's great portraitists, Holbein counted among his subjects Erasmus, More, and Henry VIII, as well as several of Henry's wives and many members of his court. One of his most noted portraits is *The Ambassadors* (London, National Gallery), the 1533 full-length double portrait of Jean de Dinteville, French ambassador to the English court, and Georges de Selves, Bishop of Lavaur. Among his surviving religious works, the best known is his 1521 panel *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* (Basel Kunstmuseum), which figured importantly in Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1869 novel *The Idiot*. Numerous later artists, including Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Rubens, Reynolds, and Whistler, were inspired by Holbein's images and by characteristics of his style and, in addition to Dostoevsky, authors such as George Sand, Edith Wharton, and Henry James absorbed elements of his pictorial imagination into their works.³

2. This book of early drawings is in the collection of the print room of the Kunstmuseum Basel. See E. Michael, *The Drawings By Hans Holbein The Younger For Erasmus' Praise Of Folly (Outstanding Dissertations in the Fine Arts)* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1986).

3. For a detailed overview of Holbein's influence on later artists and writers, see E. Michael, "The Legacy of Holbein's *Gedankenreichtum*," *Studies in the History of Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, to appear 1999).

Besides his renown as a portraitist, Holbein is recognized for his designs for jewelry and goldsmithwork, his decorations for pageants and celebrations and, above all, for his large body of graphic works which includes not only woodcut and metal-cut illustrations but also ornamental borders, printers' devices, and initials. As far as we know, it was the Basel printer Johannes Froben who gave him his first commission for a graphic design – a woodcut title-page border in the form of a Renaissance niche for a book by Henricus Glareanus, *Isagoge in musicen...*, which appeared in May or June 1516. Holbein's most significant graphic works, however, were his two major woodcut cycles, both first printed in Lyons in 1538 by the brothers Melchior and Gaspar Trechsel: The *Images of Death* (sometimes called the "Dance of Death"), and the cycle of Old Testament illustrations known as the *Icones* (reproduced in this Octavo Edition).

The *Images of Death* (*Les simulachres & historiees faces de la mort*) appeared in an octavo volume of 41 pictures accompanied by French verses. The Old Testament illustrations appeared in two separate publications: one of these was an octavo "picture Bible" bearing the title *Historiarum Veteris Instrumenti icones ad vivum expressae* – the *Icones* – printed by the Trechsels for the publishers Jean and François Frellon. The second publication was a folio Vulgate Bible, *Biblia utriusque Testamenti iuxta Vulgatam translationem*, also printed by the Trechsels but for the publisher Hughes de la Porte.⁴

The *Icones* comprises 88 Bible illustrations in horizontal format, supplemented by four illustrations in vertical format taken from the *Images of Death* – "The Creation of Eve," "The Fall," "The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden," and "The Punishment of Adam and Eve." The pictures are accompanied by



Fig. 1. Holbein's woodcut of "The Fall" from the folio Vulgate Bible (1538), an image not included in the *Icones*.

citations of the relevant Biblical text together with short Latin explanatory notes.

In the folio Bible, the Old Testament portion contains 87 Bible illustrations, supplemented by one illustration, "The Creation of Eve," from the *Images of Death*. One of the 87 illustrations in this folio Bible, "The Fall," (Fig. 1) is not included in the *Icones* edition. On the other hand, two Bible illustrations which are included in the *Icones* – "The Fool" for Psalm 52 and "The Genealogy of Alexander's Descendants" for Daniel 11 – are missing from the folio Bible. The folio Bible contains one additional picture, not counted above – the illustration for "Jonah," which is definitely not by Holbein and was probably designed by the illustrator of the New Testament portion of the Bible.

4. In addition to these two 1538 editions of the Old Testament illustrations, there exists a set of 81 so-called "proofs" in the print room of the Basel Kunstmuseum.

The earliest edition of the *Icones* gives no information about the identity of the artist. In the following year, 1539, however, the Frellons published a second edition, also printed by the Trechsels, which included a poem in praise of Holbein by his friend and admirer, the poet Nicolas Bourbon, who declared that Holbein surpasses the ancient Greek artists Apelles, Zeuxis, and Parrhasius. Although we may, by the inclusion of this poem, infer that Holbein was the principal author of the Bible cycle, several inferior illustrations, such as those for *Joel I* and *Zechariah I*, are very likely not by Holbein. Added to this second edition were lines of explanatory text in French rhyming quatrains, presumably composed by Gilles Corrozet, the author of one of the forewords and the postscript.

Subsequent editions of the *Icones*, containing texts in French, Spanish, English, and Latin, were printed and published by the Frellons in 1543, 1547, and 1549. The edition reproduced on this compact disc, with the modified Latin title *Icones Historiarum Veteris Testamenti*, appeared in 1547 and retains the Latin text (with occasional alterations) above the pictures as well as the French explanatory text below. Two of the illustrations, "Nathan Before King David" and "Isaiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem," were not included in the earliest editions, first appearing in 1543.

There are some challenging, basically unresolved questions connected with the genesis of the *Icones*. Although the first edition appeared in 1538, the illustrations were designed several years prior to their publication. The earliest year in which they could have been designed is 1523, because the picture for "The Flood" in the *Icones* was a reworked and cropped image of one that Holbein had designed for Thomas Wolff's 1523

Pentateuch. The latest year in which they might have been designed is 1531, when a set of plagiarized copies of the *Icones* appeared in a Zurich Bible published by Christoph Froschauer. The question here is how the copyist who made the Zurich Bible images obtained access to Holbein's pictures, which were only first published in 1538. The commonly proposed answer is that the copyist must have acquired a set of the so-called "proofs" (of which the only extant example is in the Basel Kunstmuseum).

Efforts to date the *Icones* more precisely than the period from 1523 to 1531 have led to two schools of thought. The first, proposed by Alfred Woltmann⁵ in 1874 and supported by Salomon Vögelin⁶ in 1879, argues that since most of the woodblocks appear to have been cut by Hans Lützelburger, one of Holbein's principal cutters, they must have been designed no later than 1526, the year in which Lützelburger died. Sustaining this view is the masterful, delicate cutting in many of the images, characteristic of Lützelburger. The lines capture the essence of Holbein's lively, differentiated draughtsmanship, the subtle plasticity created by Holbein's distribution of areas of hatching, the expressiveness of the Holbein's faces, and the fluid gestures of his figures. The view that the images were probably designed by 1526 has gained additional support in the recent Holbein monograph by Oscar Bätschmann and Pascal Griener,⁷ who would date the *Icones* illustrations closer in

5. A. Woltmann, *Holbein und Seine Zeit: Des Künstlers Familie, Leben und Schaffen*, vol. 1 (2nd ed., Leipzig: E.A. Seeman, 1874-1876), p. 224.

6. S. Vögelin, "Ergänzungen und Nachweisungen zum Holzschnittwerk Hans Holbeins des Jüngeren," *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, 2, 1879, pp. 336-37.

7. O. Bätschmann and P. Griener, *Hans Holbein* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 60-63.

time to earlier Holbein Bible woodcuts made for texts by Martin Luther and also place them closer to the activities of the Trechsel brothers in Lyons and of Hans Lützelburger in Basel.

The second school of thought, proposed by Heinrich Alfred Schmid⁸ in 1899 and later supported by Hans Reinhardt⁹ in 1977, deems the arguments that the *Icones* were cut by Lützelburger unpersuasive, and therefore does not consider the year of Lützelburger's death – 1526 – as the latest year in which Holbein could have made the designs. Instead, their arguments are based on compositional considerations, pointing out that the spatial clarity and monumentality in the *Icones* are more consonant with mural designs Holbein made for the Basel Town Hall in 1530 than with the more spatially constrained compositions of the *Images of Death*, which are known to have been cut by Lützelburger. Thus they concluded that the majority of the *Icones* images were probably designed by Holbein around 1529-1530, during his second Basel period. These compositional differences can, however, be explained without postulating a difference in the dates of the designs. The horizontal format of the *Icones* images provides a wider spatial envelope, receptive to expansive backgrounds and panoramic scenes, while the *Images of Death* pictures are vertical and provide only a relatively narrow, constricted space for the figures and settings. As to the cutting of the *Icones* woodblocks in the later period, the name of the Strassburg cutter Veit Specklin has been suggested.

The question of why the *Icones*, which were designed no later than 1531, were only first published in 1538 remains open. Perhaps, as suggested by Lionel Cust¹⁰ in 1891, Holbein traveled to Lyons after his visit to Basel from London in 1538

and, on that occasion, prompted the publication of both the *Icones* and the *Images of Death* later that year. This still does not, however, explain the reason for the delay.

Although the creation of the *Icones* and their publication history has received significant attention from Holbein scholars, recent interest has tended to emphasize the history and impact of the images. The iconography of the *Icones* has a long tradition in earlier hand-painted and woodcut-illustrated Bibles. Despite the existence of impressively illuminated Italian Bibles, early incunabula woodcut cycles did not exhibit the technical and artistic authority associated with a masterful personal style. They were rendered in simple bold lines – rather flat and schematic – though often exhibiting a humorous charm. Toward the end of the fifteenth century, cycles such as the 1494 Lübeck Bible illustrated by Stephan Arndt, began to exhibit a more three-dimensional style, with hatched areas of light and shade giving the effect of more sculpturally conceived figures.

Holbein's older contemporary Albrecht Dürer brought graphic illustration to a new level of virtuosity. Although Dürer produced a number of New Testament cycles as well as some isolated Old Testament images, he never produced a cycle of illustrations for the Old Testament. The extraordinary refinements made by Dürer in the field of woodcut inspired other early sixteenth-century artists toward greater enter-

8. H.A. Schmid, "Holbeins Tätigkeit für die Basler Verleger," *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 20 (1899), p. 23. Reprinted in *Gesammelte Kunsthistorische Schriften* (Leipzig and Zurich: Heitz, 1933), p. 166.

9. H. Reinhardt, "Einige Bemerkungen zum graphischen Werk Hans Holbeins des Jüngeren," *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte*, 34, no. 4 (1977), p. 249.

10. L. Cust, "Hans Holbein," *Dictionary of National Biography*, 9 (1891), p. 1003.

prise in woodcut illustration, most notably a major cycle of Bible woodcuts designed by Lucas Cranach the Elder and a Master H.B. for Martin Luther's popular German translation of the New Testament, *Das Neue Testament Deutzsch* (the so-called "September Testament") published in Wittenberg by Melchior Lotthar in 1522. Cranach used Dürer's *Apocalyptic Visions of St. John* as models, but altered them, at Luther's instruction, to adhere more closely to the Biblical text. Cranach's pictures were, in turn, used by Holbein as models for twenty-one illustrations to the *Apocalypse*, published by Thomas Wolff in Basel in 1523. That same year, Melchior Lotthar produced an Old Testament whose illustrations provided Holbein with models for a series of eleven Old Testament woodcuts (not the *Icones*), also published in 1523 by Thomas Wolff. Holbein used a cut-down version of one of these illustrations, "Noah's Ark" in the *Icones*. Another, "The Sacrifice of Isaac," provided a model for the ram caught in the bushes behind Abraham.

The *Icones* illustrations embody two distinct iconographic traditions. The first of these has its origins in a manuscript commentary on the Bible, *Postillae perpetuae in universam S. Scripturam*, written and illustrated in about 1320 by Nicholas of Lyra. This manuscript contains a series of schematic drawings including diagrams of the Ark of the Covenant, the Camps of the Tribes of Israel, and Ezekiel's vision of the restored Temple of Solomon. It was first set in print with woodcut illustrations in 1481 by Nuremberg publisher Anton Koberger. These illustrations provided the early prototypes for ten of Holbein's *Icones* illustrations.

The second tradition, a series of narrative illustrations on which the majority of the remaining *Icones* images depend,



Fig. 2. Isaiah's vision adapted from Holbein's *Icones* in a 1560 Bible cycle by Virgil Solis.

has its origins in a Cologne illuminated manuscript from about 1460 in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek, *Historienbibel des Alten Testaments*, or in a closely related manuscript. This cycle was first published in woodcut around 1478/79 in Cologne by Bartholomäus von Unckel and/or Heinrich Quentell. It appeared in two separate editions which were illustrated almost identically, except that the former contained 113 woodcut illustrations and the latter 123. When the firm of von Unckel/Quentell went out of business, 109 of the woodblocks were acquired by Anton Koberger who used them to publish a High German Bible in 1483.

The narrative illustrations from Koberger's 1483 Bible and the schematic illustrations from his 1481 edition of Nicholas of Lyra's *Postillae* were united for the first time in a 1490 edition of the famous Malermi Bible printed in Venice by Giovanni Ragazzo for the Florentine publisher Lucantonio da Giunta. A number of later Bible cycles produced both north and south of

the Alps drew upon this Malermi edition for iconographic models. Two of these cycles are of particular significance to the *Icones* – a 1518 folio Vulgate Bible printed in Lyons by Jacques Sacon for the younger Anton Koberger, and a later edition printed in 1520 by Jean Marion. These Bibles were illustrated by Erhard Schön and Hans Springinklee, who transformed the Italian style of the Malermi examples into a German style associated with the Nuremberg/Dürer school. Both the close correspondence of many iconographic details, as well as the correspondence in the size of the illustrations, suggest that these Bibles provided the principal immediate models for Holbein.

In 1524, when Holbein is known to have traveled to France, he may have stopped in Lyons (an active center of book publishing) and made contact there with the printing establishments of the Trechsel brothers and the Frellons. He could have shown them some of his graphic works, including his recent (1523) Bible illustrations for Thomas Wolff, received the commission for the *Icones*, and seen the Schön/Springinklee exemplars during this time.

Holbein transformed the Schön/Springinklee prototypes into paradigms of Italianizing High Renaissance book illustration by taking them a step beyond the mere stylistic transformation of traditional prototypes. Occasionally he departed from conventional iconographic tradition. Some unique details in his pictures not drawn from earlier models suggest that he had, in some instances, closely consulted the Biblical text itself. His illustration "The Sacrifice of Abraham" from Genesis 22, for example, shows the traditional scene with "the angel of the Lord" calling on Abraham not to harm his son Isaac. In the far distance, however, Holbein included an element not



Fig. 3. Moses ordaining princes over the people from the 1576 Bible cycle by Tobias Stimmer.

appearing in the earlier woodcut examples – the two young men and the ass who, according to the text, accompanied Abraham and Isaac to the foot of the mountain. Another illustration, "The Lord Instructing Moses on the Consecration of Aaron and his Sons" from Leviticus 8: 31 also depicts a motif not previously appearing in Bible woodcuts. In the distance, below the mountain on which Moses and the Lord are seen, Holbein illustrates a recondite passage in which Aaron and his sons "Boil the flesh [of the ram of ordination] at the door of the tent of meeting..." according to Moses' instructions. In his woodcut "Pharoah and his Army Drowning in the Red Sea" for Exodus 14 and 15, Holbein omits the traditional figure of Moses waving his rod, as depicted in the earlier woodcuts. Instead he creates a panoramic scene with vast throngs of Israelites stretching into an infinite landscape, fleeing from Pharoah and his army who are seen drowning in the fore-



Fig. 4. Samuel anointing Saul as king from a 1588 Bible by the Venice Bible Master.

ground. Over the scene hovers the pillar of fire and cloud, connoting the divine presence. His image, "The Lord Instructing Moses to Leave Harvest Gleanings for the Poor" illustrating Leviticus 19:9, is entirely original. Moses is shown on a mountaintop receiving his instruction. In the foreground valley, some figures glean wheat and grapes, while in the distance a wagon heavily laden with harvested wheat is driven toward a distant town.

An impact of Holbein's *Icones* outside the area of book illustration is seen among late sixteenth-century Swiss glass painters, who used a variety of the images for auxilliary scenes in stained glass window designs. More importantly, however, a number of other sixteenth-century Bible illustrators produced free adaptations of selected *Icones* images. These included an early 1538 edition of the Old Testament

published in Paris by Pierre Regnault with metal-cuts by Jacques Le Fèvre (Jacob Faber, a Basel cutter who also made metal-cuts for some Holbein designs), a 1560 Bible cycle by Virgil Solis published by S. Feyerabend in Frankfurt (Fig. 2), and a major 1576 cycle by Tobias Stimmer published by Thomas Guarin in Basel (Fig. 3). One particularly fine Italian Bible containing a large number of images based on the *Icones* was designed by the Venice Bible Master, an unidentified artist probably from the circle of Titian (Fig. 4). Although this cycle appeared in a 1588 Bible, *Sacra Biblia...* published in Venice by the brothers Giovanni Giolito de' Ferrari the Younger and Giovanni Paolo Giolito de' Ferrari, some of its individual illustrations had, curiously, already appeared in the early 1550s in a non-Biblical context.¹¹ These later Bible cycles are themselves significant landmarks in the evolution of the genre. The *Icones* thus represent not only a highlight of Holbein's graphic oeuvre, but also occupy a central position in the history of Bible illustration.

Erika Michael is an art historian whose specialty is Northern European Renaissance art, with a particular interest in Holbein. She has written numerous books and articles, including *Hans Holbein the Younger: A Guide to Research* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997) and "The Iconographic History of Hans Holbein the Younger's *Icones* and their Reception in the Later Sixteenth Century," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 3, 1992, 28-47.

Binding

The binding of *Icones Historiarum Veteris Testamenti* is of red, pebbled goatskin over pasteboard measuring $7\frac{5}{8} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ inches (194 x 140 mm). The front and back boards are tooled in gilt with a border of dog-toothed rolls enclosing three rules. This pattern repeats to create an interior panel, which has gilt arabesque decorations on the outer corners and at the midpoint of each of the outer sides of the center panel. The board edges and turn-ins are gold tooled with rolls and fillets.

The spine is divided by five pairs of raised bands with gold decoration in all six panels. The gilt title is in the second panel and the date is in the bottom spine panel; other panels are decorated in gold with rolls, fillets, and other small tools.

"Bound by Hering, 9 Newman St." is stamped in black ink on the verso of the front flyleaf. The textblock has gilt edges and glossy yellow paper for the paste-down and flyleaves.

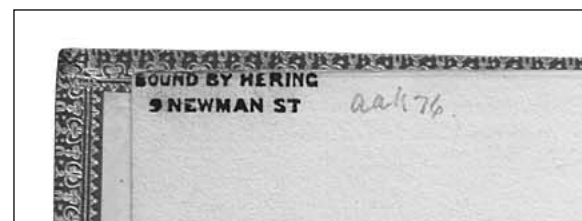
[Click here to see binding](#)

Collation 4^o:A-N⁴ [\$3 signed]; 52 leaves unnumbered.

Contents: **A1^a**: printed title. **A1^b**: 'FRANCISCVS FRELLONIVS | Christiano lectori S.' **A2^{a-b}**: 'Nicolai Borbonii Vando- | perani Poetae Lingonensis | Ad Lectorem Carmen.' **A3^{a-b}**: 'Gilles Corrozet | Aux Lecteurs.' **A4^a-N2^b**: text, each page contains Latin text above central woodcut print by Holbein, with French poem below. **N3^a**: 'L'autheur.' **N3^b**: four individual woodcut prints of the Four Evangelists. **N4^a**: colophon. **N4^b**: blank.

Provenance

If any ancient collectors left their marks in this copy of Holbein's *Icones*, all trace disappeared in the rebinding of the book by the firm of Hering in the nineteenth century. Charles Hering the elder, a German émigré, had established himself as one of the finest bookbinders in London by the time of his early death at the age of fifty-two in 1815. He was the leading English craftsman between Roger Payne and Charles Lewis. The principal patrons of the firm were the Prince Regent, the second Earl Spencer (whose books are now at the John Rylands University Library in Manchester), and Thomas Grenville (whose collection is in the British Library). Hering's own chief technical innovation was the use of urine in the preparation of morocco skins for binding. After Charles Hering's death, the firm was continued by his brother and younger members of the family at the new address of 9 Newman Street (as on the label here) until the business passed out of family hands in 1845. The binding of the *Icones* must therefore be dated between 1815 and 1844.



The earliest recorded owner of the book in its new binding is Sydney Carlyle Cockerell (1867-1962) who acquired the book in 1902. Cockerell began his career in London as a clerk

in the family firm of coal merchants. The carefully cultivated acquaintance of John Ruskin and William Morris soon led to more congenial and bibliophilic pursuits. Cockerell was commissioned to catalogue Morris' fine collection of books and manuscripts in 1892 and to serve, by 1894, as secretary to his Kelmscott Press, eventually winding up affairs after Morris' death in 1896. From 1908 to 1937, Cockerell was the director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, which he succeeded in reestablishing as the most beautiful provincial gallery in England. After retiring to Kew, he continued to correspond with, advise, and receive pilgrims into an extreme old age.

Cockerell had an often-declared "genius" for friendship. A cynic might add that he took care to let the world know it, although his form of self-advertisement was not quite name-dropping. Plainly, a great many people were just as pleased to know S.C. Cockerell as he was to be acquainted with them. During his lifetime he arranged to have Viola Meynell edit two anthologies of his incoming mail from the great and good and well-connected, appropriately entitled *Friends of a Lifetime* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940) and *The Best of Friends* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956). This copy of the *Icones* is another testament to such friendship. The careful student of this impeccable catena of provenance may be tempted to adapt Ralph Waldo Emerson's remarks on the futility of the unrecorded life and observe that the undocumented friendship is not worth having. A lesser man might have hoped to outlive his enemies; Cockerell, although rich in antagonists, was nourished by outliving his "dear" and "beloved" friends. The properly loaned book comes back promptly like a boomerang; the properly gifted volume returns with the surprising regularity

of a half-forgotten comet – half-forgotten, that is, by bibliophiles who are not astronomers at heart.

Cockerell's copy of the *Icones* is now owned by Bridwell Library at Southern Methodist University, where much else associated with British fine printing is now to be found. When the Library acquired Emery Walker's copy of the Bible printed by the Doves Press on vellum, Colin Franklin delivered an address in the chapel, later published as *The Triple Crown: Kelmscott, Doves, and Ashendene* (Dallas: Bridwell Library, 1977). The endpapers of this Holbein volume might well have served as illustration or even text for this sermon, for here we read the names of three men intimately associated with these three greatest of

Provenance

S. C. Cockerell, Richmond, Surrey. 1902. to Emery Walker April 2, 1904

Emery Walker 7 Hammersmith Terrace London W. 6

Bequeathed back to me by my beloved friend 22 July 1933 SCC and given to another dear friend Capt. St John Hornby 16 Nov. 1933 whose family returned it to SCC after CHATH's death on 26 April 1946.

To BSCrm from Sydney Cockerell Kew 24 Jan 1960

See E. Weir, Cat. 20, No. 32

Ruari McLean April 1964

British fine presses. Cockerell was secretary to the Kelmscott Press where Emery Walker was typographer and printer (and partner in all but name); Walker went on to become a joint founder of the Doves Press with T.J. Cobden-Sanderson; C.H. St. John Hornby was the sole proprietor of the Ashendene Press.

The *Icones* first left Cockerell's hands when he gave it to Emery Walker in 1904. After his years with the Kelmscott Press ended, Cockerell became Walker's partner in the firm of process engravers known successively as Walker & Boutall, Walker & Cockerell, and finally Emery Walker Limited. The partnership lasted from 1900 to 1904; the book may possibly have been a parting gift. It was one of many such presents, it appears. Cockerell printed in *Friends of a Lifetime* a letter from Walker (1921) that ends: "The next time you come you must inspect the row of volumes I owe to your generosity." When Walker died in 1933, the *Icones* returned to Cockerell, who passed it on later that year to another old friend, C.H. St. John Hornby (1867-1940). Like Morris and Cobden-Sanderson before him, Hornby obtained a type of his own from Walker (at that time in partnership with Cockerell), the "Subiaco," based on the type used by Sweynheym and Pannartz at Subiaco in 1465. The Holbein woodcuts were an especially suitable gift to Hornby, for wood was the medium to which the Ashendene Press remained faithful long into an era of metal, linoleum, and photography.

Hornby was Cockerell's contemporary but did not outlive him. The book, its homing instinct already confirmed in writing, duly found its way back into Cockerell's hands, there to remain for many years until a new and appropriate link in the chain could be found. It was during this interval in Cockerell's possession that the entry referring to Weil's catalogue was

probably added. Cockerell was a bibliophile and museum man but not a bookseller or art dealer; he was therefore often consulted by his eminent friends as an expert and trustworthy adviser untainted by trade. He was, however, not independently wealthy and remained a keen student of the market and advancing prices; he bought and sold with discretion throughout his career. When, in 1952, Ernst Weil, Einstein's bibliographer and perhaps the leading scientific bookseller of the century, catalogued a copy of the *Icones* in contemporary vellum at £105, Cockerell naturally thought the fact worth noting for possible future reference.

During his last years Cockerell gave away some of his possessions and sold many others, thinking that his longevity should not deprive his children of their inheritance indefinitely. (One of these children was Sir Christopher Cockerell, inventor of the hovercraft. The father lived to take pride in his son's technical achievements but had originally dismissed him with disdain as "no better than a garage hand.") Cockerell's neighbor, Brian S. Cron, a fellow collector of manuscripts, helped him to dispose of part of his library; some of Cockerell's medieval manuscripts also passed into Cron's collection. This Holbein volume was a gift in 1960. Cockerell died in 1962 and by 1964 the book belonged to the typographer and historian of book design, Ruari McLean. Bridwell Library bought the book in 1990 from the Scottish bookseller Kulgin Duval.

Holbein and the Woodcut

The woodcut is the earliest of the relief printing processes, its origins lost in antiquity. It is made by cutting or chiseling away the non-printing areas of an image on the plank side of a piece of wood. Any kind of wood may be used, but achieving the greatest amount of detail requires a close-grained hardwood, such as pear, apple, sycamore, or beech. The design that is left in relief is coated with a film of viscous ink by means of a dauber or roller, and the image is then transferred to paper. In the East, where the woodcut almost certainly made its first appearance, the requisite pressure was usually applied with a hand-held, spoonlike device, rubbed across the back of the paper, while in the West, some sort of mechanical printing device was invariably preferred.

The first European woodcut that can be reliably dated is a large and boldly cut image of St. Christopher carrying the Christ Child on his shoulders. Though the single copy in existence is dated 1423, there is no way of knowing if that was the date of its cutting or was meant to mark some event that year. The St. Christopher was also hand colored, prefiguring the later popularity of so-called blockbooks in which woodcut illustrations, often colored, provided the illiterate with visual narratives from the Bible, while the idle occupied themselves with woodcut-printed decks of playing cards. However coarse and ill-wrought, high-minded or profane, such woodcuts were dramatically cheaper and easier to produce than the jewel-like illustrations featured in illuminated manuscripts.

If the earliest woodcuts were technically monotonous – what the wood engraver and historian W.J. Linton called “the quite unintelligent cutting with a knife on each side of a black line” – no such charge could be brought against the woodcuts being made by the end of the fifteenth century (*Masters of Wood-Engraving* [New Haven, Ct.: Privately printed, 1889]). For one thing, the popularity of prints had increased, attracting prominent artists to the process, but more importantly, the technology of bookmaking had radically changed by then. Though attempts to speed up the book production process dated at least as far back as Ciceronian Rome, no scriptorium full of copyists could possibly cope with the effects of the Renaissance. This wide-ranging cultural movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries shocked Europe out of its torpor and stimulated both learning and literacy. Of all the developments that helped sustain the Renaissance, none was more important than the “invention” of printing.

Gutenberg’s perfection in the 1440s and 1450s of printing from movable type provided the woodcut artist with a repeatable canvas, not only for illustrations but for all of a book’s decorative matter. Though Gutenberg could not claim to have discovered the principles of relief printing, he did succeed in devising a system for manufacturing metal type that endured for over 400 years. His first printed book, the incomparable 42-line Bible of c. 1455, managed to imitate its manuscript exemplars remarkably well – but only in black ink. The colored initials and decorations were added later by hand. Gutenberg, and the printers who quickly followed, can not have failed to recognize that the woodcut offered an opportunity to eliminate this bottleneck as well. Perhaps buyers, even those used

to the simplest of manuscripts, insisted on seeing at least some color in the products of the press, initials, perhaps, in red or blue. Printing in color, however, was not so simple. Almost from the start, printers realized that their wooden presses were not capable of making a good impression from inked-up type unless the paper was first dampened; in doing so, the uneven thickness of handmade paper was mitigated and the transfer of ink was more efficient. Unfortunately, even slightly damp paper was dimensionally unstable, so that an initial or decoration printed in a second or third color would not consistently register with a text forme printed earlier, but would wander unpredictably.

Though the decoration of books by hand in color was to stubbornly persist well into the sixteenth century, the advantage of printing metal text type along with woodcut initials, decorations, and illustrations, all in one pass through the press, was too compelling for printers to resist; by the 1480s the book was becoming strongly monochromatic. No wonder, then, that printing became known as “the black art” (helped too, no doubt, by the conflation of one of its early promoters, Johann Fust, with the necromancer Dr. Faust). The medium was sturdy as well. Carefully handled, a woodcut could be used to produce more than 100,000 impressions. Where especially fine detail was required, relief designs were sometimes cut on metal.

Nowhere did the relief woodcut as an essential adjunct to bookmaking become more prominent than in the city of Basel. Situated on the Rhine, on an important trade route from Italy to the Netherlands, Basel was prosperous, theologically liberal, and a growing center of humanistic studies. For all

these reasons, the city achieved an enviable reputation as a great publishing center by the early part of the sixteenth century, its works marked not only by distinguished scholarship, but by a style of vigorous typography and inventive decoration uniquely its own. Printing was introduced to Basel by Berthold Ruppel (reported to have been a pupil of Gutenberg) sometime in the 1460s, and he was followed by Michael Wenssler, Bernard Richel, and Johann von Amerbach, the latter the first to use roman types there and the first to use a woodcut-decorated title page. The printing historian A.F. Johnson declared that two woodcut series – the illustrations to *Der Ritter vom Turn* (1493) and those for Sebastian Brant’s *Narrenschiff* (1494) – produced at Basel in the last decade of the fifteenth century, and which he attributed to an unknown artist, were the best German woodcuts of the century (*The First Century of Printing at Basel* [London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1926]). It is now known that both books contain the designs of Albrecht Dürer, who then lived in that city.

Though Amerbach’s achievements were formidable, no one contributed more to the enduring fame of Basel as a center of the European book trade than Johann Froben, whose first dated book appeared in 1491. Though his early career was devoid of innovation, Froben’s reputation as a printer and publisher blossomed in the sixteenth century. The chief reasons for his success (and subsequent influence on other printers) were his alliance with the scholar Erasmus in 1514 and his brilliant use of book decoration, including woodcut title pages, borders, and initials.

Many artists were working in Basel at this time, but none advanced the decoration of books there more than Urs Graf

and Hans Holbein. Graf, by turns a goldsmith, brawling mercenary, and artist, favored allegorical and grotesque motifs in his work, especially in his initials. Holbein (whose life and artistic achievements are well covered by Erika Michael in her commentary for this Octavo Edition) came to Basel in 1515 and soon after 1520 was producing most of the book decoration work for Froben and his fellow printers. Holbein's designs were superb, showing a mastery of composition and detail, despite the challenges of working within the confines of a title page border or behind the letter of an initial. Sometimes, notes A.F. Johnson, the decoration overwhelms the text, but he is quick to blame the typographer for this lapse, not the designer. Holbein was at his most prolific in the 1520s, and it was during this period that he produced his greatest works in woodcut – the “Dance of Death” series (along with a set of initials called the “Little Dance of Death”) and the *Icones* – though neither was published until 1538.

It should be noted that by this time in the history of the woodcut, a clear demarcation of roles existed between the artist who drew the designs, whether on paper or directly on the blocks, and the artisan who actually cut them. The artist – perhaps rightly so – is more often honored by posterity than the seemingly humble blockcutter, or *formschneider*, but there can be no doubt that the exquisite delicacy of the cuts for, say Dürer's “Little Passion” or Holbein's “Dance of Death,” was the work of consummate craftsmen, however shadowy, or even anonymous, history declares them to be. How important their standing was is demonstrated in the famous *Ständebuch* (or, Book of Trades) of Hans Sachs (1568), where Jost Amman's marvelous woodcut portraits give equal weight to artist and

blockcutter. There is ample evidence to show that the formschneider was not only highly regarded in book circles of the time, but well-paid also.

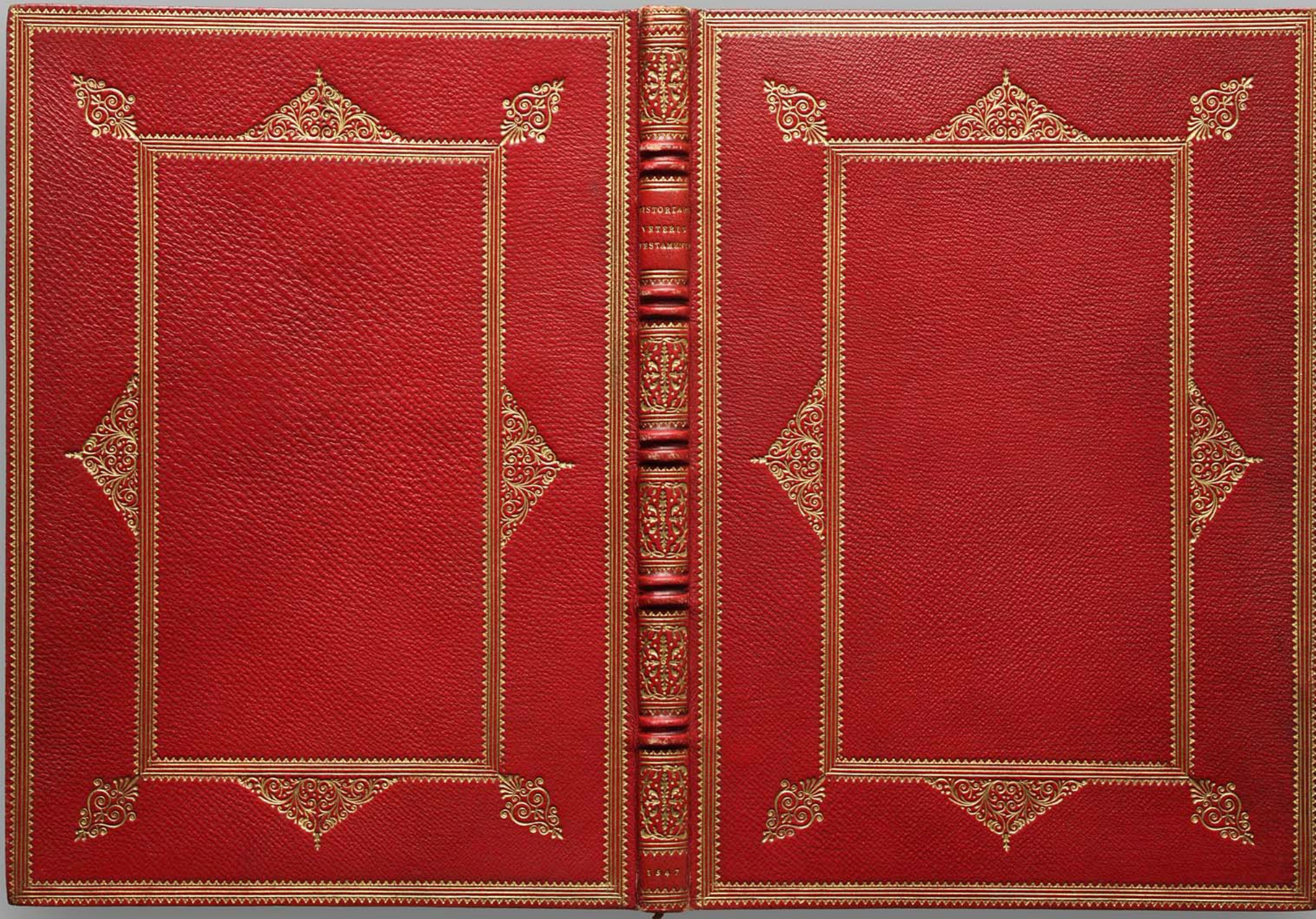
Holbein's formschneider for the “Dance of Death,” and probably the *Icones*, was Hans Lützelburger, of whom Linton writes in his *Masters of Wood-Engraving*, “nothing indeed, by knife or by graver, is of higher quality than this man's doing.” Little survives to document his life, but through his sure hand Holbein created unforgettable images that still evoke wonder. Linton is unstinting in his praise: “Very deft his hand, from long practice, as he cuts so conscientiously what he seems to see... To the perceiving artist-eyes of a Lützelburger is revealed the inner spirit as well as the outer body of Holbein's intelligently formed lines: and so, with perhaps only the hand-ability, he produces an intelligent and artistic result... Most delicate and full of subtle meaning was each considered touch of the accomplished draftsman, and this engraver has preserved it all: neither leaving extraneous wood to the loss of delicacy, so vulgarising the lines, nor cutting away those nice gradations and inequalities which assist expression.”

Lützelburger died in 1526 and Froben in 1527. Holbein left Basel for England in 1532, bringing an end to one of the great periods in the history of the woodcut and its glorious application to the art of the book. Though Basel continued to exert an influence on printing and publishing for some years to come, the preeminent role passed to France, where new adventurers explored the arts of type design, typography, and book illustration. In England, Holbein prospered, despite his uncomfortable proximity to the various palace intrigues that characterized Henry VIII's reign. Among the acquaintances he made was

an earnest, though somewhat effulgent, French poet by the name of Nicolas Bourbon. Though Bourbon's own literary efforts have not fared well with posterity, he recognized the genius in his friend:

Guest! Wisht thou images to behold most like the living?
Behold this noble work of Holbein's hand.

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Hans Holbein. *Icones Historiarum Veteris Testamenti*. Lyon, 1547. BRIDWELL LIBRARY

*By Gellat man Holb. 1711.
Pet. 1711 A.W.*

ICONES
HISTORIA-
RVM VETERIS
TESTAMENTI,

Ad viuum expressæ, extremâque diligentia emenda-
tiores factæ, Gallicis in expositione homœo-
teleutis, ac versuum ordinibus (qui prius
turbati, ac impares) suo nu-
mero restitutis.

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LVGDVNI,
Apud Ioannem Frellonium,
1547.